

# Memorandum

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**To:** Dr. Richard Everson, Dr. Helen Swede, Rajni Mehta

**From:** Dr. Anne Betzner, Dan Kavanaugh, Dr. Dean Troyer, Dr. Ann Wendling

**CC:** Dr. Lou Gonsalves, Dr. Lloyd Mueller, Dr. Cathryn Phillips, Barbara Walsh

**Date:** 8/25/10

**Re: Biorepository Feasibility Study Survey Methodology Recommendations**

PDA has been charged with reviewing the survey methodology for the upcoming Biorepository Feasibility Study, and making recommendations for improvements. Overall, we see the methodology as strong. There is a rich history of mail surveys and a mixed mode survey including telephone follow-up has been proven to improve response rates. To further improve survey methodology we make recommendations in two categories: changes to improve data quality, and those to elicit higher response rates. Changes to improve data quality may be found under separate cover as comments embedded in the survey as “tracked changes.” The purpose of this memo, therefore, is to make suggestions to help ensure the highest response rate possible.

Our recommendations regarding response rate are based on the work of Don Dillman, a well-known researcher in the field of survey methodology who has conducted research in the areas of mail survey design and implementation. In 2007, he published a book titled, *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, which provides research-based survey design and implementation recommendations aimed at achieving high-quality data and high response rates. The remainder of this memo highlights key recommendations from Dillman’s 2007 text, and notes where these align or deviate from the proposed methodology for the Biorepository Feasibility Study as we understand it.

**Our understanding of the Biorepository Feasibility Study**

The recommendations in this memo are based on the following understanding of the Biorepository Feasibility Study survey methodology:

- A mail survey will be sent to all chairs of Pathology and IRB panels in the state.
- The survey will be sent with a cover letter explaining the purpose, and with a self-addressed stamped envelope in which to return the survey.
- Non-respondents will be contacted by telephone three to four weeks after the survey is sent. It is our understanding that this contact will be used to remind them to complete the survey, but that the survey would not be completed by phone.

**Recommendations for achieving high response rates to mail surveys:**

Dillman’s text highlights five elements that are needed to achieve a high response rate in mail survey. These elements include:

<b>Key elements:</b>	<b>Recommendation for Feasibility Study:</b>
<i>A respondent-friendly questionnaire.</i> This could include a wide range of elements such clearly explaining the purpose of the survey, making the survey easy to follow, clearly providing a contact person for questions, and including a pre-addressed return envelope with the survey.	Any recommendations we have in this area are reflected in our comments on the survey content. We have no additional comments here.
<i>Multiple contacts.</i> A series of five contacts including four by first class mail, and an additional contact through another form are recommended.	The bulk of our recommendations are regarding this element, which will be explained in more detail in the following section.
<i>Including a return envelope with real first class stamps.</i> This recommendation is based on research that has found that people are less likely to throw away an envelope if a real stamp attached to it (versus a business reply envelope).	As we understand the Feasibility Survey methodology, we believe that this recommendation is being met, and have no further recommendation.
<i>Personalizing the correspondence.</i> This could include elements such as including the date and person’s full name on the cover letter, and using real signatures to sign the letters.	Based on our review of the survey materials, it appears that this recommendation is being met with the current methodology.
<i>Token prepaid incentives.</i> Survey research has found that prepaid incentives as small as \$1 have been found to be very effective in increasing response rates to mail surveys.	While we acknowledge the benefits of using incentive, we do not find this recommendation to be relevant for this survey, and are not recommending that an incentive be used for this survey.

Out of all of these recommendations, the second (providing multiple contacts) is most highly stressed. In fact, in the text Dillman says that, “Multiple contacts have been shown to be more effective than any other technique for increasing response to surveys by mail.” He recommends the following five contacts:

- **Contact 1 – Prenotice letter:** This letter should explain that a questionnaire will be arriving shortly, describe the purpose of the survey and why a response is important, and thank the person in advance for responding. It should also include contact information.
- **Contact 2 – Initial questionnaire:** The questionnaire should be sent no later than a week later. In addition to the survey, the questionnaire should include a cover letter, and a return envelope with real first class stamps attached.
- **Contact 3 – Post card:** Approximately a week after the initial questionnaire is sent, it is recommended that a post card sized mailing be sent to all participants. This post card should express appreciation for responding, and indicate that if the completed questionnaire has not been sent, that it hoped that it will be mailed soon. This should be sent to all survey participants regardless of response status.

- **Contact 4 – Replacement questionnaire:** About two to four weeks after the post card is sent, a replacement questionnaire should be sent to non-respondents. This should contain another questionnaire and return envelope. In addition, the cover letter should be revised to include a stronger tone of insistence. It should mention that your records indicate they have not responded yet, and because of this you are sending a replacement questionnaire for them to fill out.
- **Contact 5 – Final contact by another means:** The last contact should be of a different means than the other contacts listed above. Telephone is one of the recommended methods and matches what is being proposed in the feasibility study methodology. Dillman recommends that non-respondents are contacted by telephone a few weeks after the replacement questionnaire is sent.

Based on our understanding, we believe that the current methodology includes two of these five contacts (the initial questionnaire, and the final contact by another means). Therefore, our primary recommendation for changes to the survey methodology is that three additional contacts be added. These additional contacts include: 1) a prenotice letter sent up to a week before the initial questionnaire is sent, 2) a thank you post card sent approximately a week after the initial questionnaire is sent, and 3) a replacement questionnaire sent approximately two to four weeks after the post card is sent (and a few weeks before the participant is contacted by telephone).

We anticipate that the prenotice letter will further increase the legitimacy of the survey and increase the chance that the participant will take notice of the survey when it arrives. The thank you post card is important because it provides a reminder to very busy participants who may have put the survey aside and forgotten about it, or who did not notice or open the original questionnaire. Lastly, the replacement questionnaire is important in that it gives participants who may have misplaced or accidentally disposed of the initial questionnaire another opportunity to complete it.

PDA has conducted surveys with the general population and groups of professionals using Dillman's recommendations and has achieved response rates of approximately 70%. For the Pathology survey, we anticipate that respondents will be very busy and will benefit from multiple respectful and carefully worded reminders, even if all of the recommendations described above cannot be implemented. If the response rates remain low after 5 contacts, we would recommend a sixth contact be made to non-respondents so that they may complete the survey by telephone. Mode bias should be carefully considered if a telephone survey is pursued. PDA can provide recommendations on mode bias if needed.

**Citation:**

Dillman, Don A. 2007. *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design, Second Edition—2007 Update*. John Wiley: Hoboken, NJ. 565 pp. ISBN: 0-470-03856-x. 523 pp.